

KATHRYN RHETT

## Book of Hours

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Leaves like miniature red scythes or boomerangs scattered.  
A yellow peel spirals off the blade.  
The tears of Republican women as they clutch in gold-buttoned suits.  
The you of you coming home, smoke out of the scorched air.  
A sheet corner sprouts like a fleur-de-lis into the room.  
The touching, the folding like a triptych shut, the sightless pleasure.  
The child growing larger by the hour, as if birth were endless.  
She traps her small flying hand with her mouth.

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My daughter is eight now—  
she won't be taken from me.  
She is solid, real.  
With Botticelli hair she swims in the forest still.  
Once, morphine flew her through the dark.  
Her eyes closed against the dark wood of the world.  
(Here, this is what you must enter through—  
a long blackness of harsh breathing,  
being summoned to a far, daylit field.)  
The forest is attached to her.  
Sometimes she falls back in—  
succumbing to convulsions,  
her limbs in a filmy, suffocating garment.  
*Mother, father,*  
*don't make me come out*  
with wide hazel eyes  
and a panicked, sideways glance—

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As if she could vanish into a hazel wood  
from which sticks are cut  
for beating or divining.  
As if she might be flattened there,  
in a perpetual suggestive inaction  
in which flowers had just streamed  
from her lips  
into the forest turning brown or green,  
between a winter and fertility  
all motion suspended  
before, in a violent burst of consciousness  
(How *did* Persephone return to earth?)  
she slammed into the world again.

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The world wanted her.  
I cradled her across my lap.  
The world wanted her  
to stay in its rough circumstance:  
but her breath fell, and her color fell away  
as if something had taken  
and turned her, the way a wind  
reverses leaves,  
to the verdigris unconsciousness  
of before, before, before.  
Awkwardly I carried her  
up the hill to home.  
Her legs dangled down.  
Ungainly and tired from giving birth  
to her brother,  
I wished that I were stronger  
to carry my girl in my arms  
with a measure of dignity,  
or shelter.

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When her eyes open  
as we kneel  
time starts again; time starts  
again for us,  
vigilant at a birth.  
We might be statues, stilled  
in the twirl of dust.  
Her eyes flick, side to side;  
she can't remember where  
she's come from.  
Once it was morning on the beige sofa—  
her skin and the light  
had a pale celery cast.  
Once it was Christmas, amidst  
the crumpled wrappings.  
All the roses gone,  
and a long, whitefaced journey back.  
As an infant, her eyes were like a seer's—  
a glassy indigo, still of the dark  
unphysical dream—  
We dimmed the lights.  
We would entice her to us.  
To our cycles of planting seeds,  
cutting flowers, tending  
our gardens made  
dormant and lustrous by ice.

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Trompe l'oeil  
is what the region's famous for—  
Madonna in a niche on  
the cathedral facade  
being actually flat paint, or  
stone window frames that aren't.  
The children disappearing  
around corners  
of the crooked-packed medieval  
houses, with a flash  
of white sock or blue shoulder,  
pale squeak of sneaker.  
Or they come out, preceded by  
an orange plastic arrow,  
shouts, a fusillade of steps—  
they're here, dimensional  
until the stones and feline shadows  
take their places.

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We saw a painted Mary,  
not holding her son  
but waiting to.  
In the dim upstairs exhibit  
of carved, dwarf-sized statuary  
made of fruitwood  
three centuries before,  
this is what I wanted:  
stories that lasted.  
As to why this was the story  
of our lives  
people believed in  
I could not tell her.  
In a darkness so gathered, enfolding  
and old, beneath the cathedral ceiling;  
in a darkness so deliberate  
it seemed scripted,  
dusted with the residue of ink, and smoke.  
The dead Christ polychrome with blood.  
Diminutive Mary, hands pinned to her sides  
as if she would be helpless  
even to receive him.

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You have to know that I am older now—  
my camera in a case,  
the kids' school pictures  
in my wallet.

I came to see the "Primavera," or  
"Allegory of Spring," to be precise,  
in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

I hadn't seen it for a long time,  
except in books  
and so I stood near  
for a while, ignoring tour groups.  
I'd paid my money, and just to see  
the one painting, so I looked and looked  
as if to store it, and still,

as before, the figure of the girl  
arrested me—not Flora with her flowers  
or Venus or the Graces, who all seem  
bored, including Mercury—but the girl,  
panicked, being lifted by the blueish  
angel in the trees, who isn't  
an angel but the wind.

And what I'd never noticed were his wings.  
Four long feathers gleaming  
through the olive leaves.  
They resembled bean pods, or catalpas  
that rattle in a breeze when they dry up.  
Or four blue swords shining,  
taking the girl to her fate.

How could I not have seen?  
(The younger me, that is,  
with my hip cocked, pausing for an



intellectual moment, headed for Greece  
 where I'd eat honey on the coast—  
     is the future real, my son once asked—  
         *oh yes, oh yes)*

This time I turned at last  
 to find my husband in the crowd,  
 and I squinted at the opposite wall.  
 A new painting hung there, or  
 rather, an old one, restored in the years  
 between my visits, an "Annunciation"  
 (there are so many), but in this one

the angel has green wings, green  
 as infant grass or a lily's  
 elongated bud, holding all that  
 shimmers inside—

I told my husband of the wings,  
 the death wings, and the birth wings  
 that reminded me of Hopkins' line  
 "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things"—  
 but in those moments of waking  
 it's just as if an angel comes to you  
 because no one else can hear.

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I meant to speak only of angels,  
yet they resemble so much else

(& of course it is expected that I see them,  
being visionary)

white sails approaching port, or  
migratory birds returning

sheets shook out on a balcony,  
two hands, a swan,

the snowy cape  
of a plague inspector, his paper

beak stuffed full of flowers,  
knocking at houses

for the hidden blackened ones.  
I meant to speak only of fortune—

I once was sure and certain  
as a stone

(or the way that sounds)

my body yet to multiply  
and wander.

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Green thorns  
in ground-tied clouds  
thicken the woods.  
Running on the fire road,  
I see water-filled depressions  
struck with chalk, or milk.  
The still gray pools unapparent  
at first, below  
sand shoulders  
glazed with snow  
at the bottom of the green  
particle-storm of woods.  
I run away from the box-house  
and back again  
on tangents.

Green thorns in clouds insects fly through  
some mornings seem part of a dream  
in an ahistorical Bohemia,  
ground-tied weightless needles.  
Other days they lash the trees,  
bind the woods back  
like the stark limitations of hours.

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A flesh-giving sun  
lit the white-gold branches.  
They were the color of weightless  
pistachio shells, tossed up into blue.  
We climbed the stairs for breakfast  
into a skylit room.  
In the woods, brushed silver along the tree roots  
lit up distances.

The worn-through t-shirts  
of old snow persisted.  
Red-washed silks of cardinals  
skimmed half-winged across and  
were gone into thorns.  
My husband and daughter  
played hide-and-seek in the yard.  
Last week our selves flashed in and out  
of a mean obscurity  
but now we seemed laid open and mild.  
Our necks bending to fit.

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This morning, motion—  
two brown fur-feathered ducks  
in the bottom-water  
make abrupt directional turns,  
the tails hinging around,  
steering through links between ponds.  
Their beaks of polished wood.  
The water now virginally fluid.  
The air runs thicker with birds and buds,  
chalky claws on the branch ends.  
The past is hardly past.  
Our child replaces herself over time  
and is more than accumulation.  
The red ground-leaves,  
iced and blown, are  
breaking down to soil.  
The night sky dry and boned with branches.

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They are sleeping,  
finally stilled  
when I check them  
one last time.  
My nightgown in the nightlight's  
golden seeded glow  
swings into shadows  
as if a fire  
jumps in the room.  
In the room made small  
by the small light:  
a fire in the cave.

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Freight cars creak by in the dark  
behind the yard.  
Our son snuffles with a first cold.  
One a.m. I've finished work.  
Waking up these days, I lapse  
back, as with one arm  
flung for the first backstroke  
to the water of dreams, whole stories.  
A color orange, an urge to kiss you—  
it's too soft,  
a remnant; shaken off.

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The horse against the sun  
is lined with fire.  
My daughter rides her  
western-style,  
heels down,  
hips easy in the saddle.  
She used to toss her head  
when she kicked that reddish horse—  
a flourish, an italic  
emphasis.  
Now she tilts her face  
up steadily, and the sun  
gilds her laughing,  
wheeling around the ring  
in figure eights.  
The sun sinks on spindles.  
A white goose  
cranks from the far field.  
I see the body radiant  
as a November day shuts its gate—  
girl and horse a thin corona  
before the fence.  
Before the twilight cold  
begins, and  
banks and fractures us.